

Kalpavriksh's Philosophy and Working Principles¹

1. A brief historical background

Kalpavriksh (KV) started off in 1979 as a group of youngsters concerned about the state and future of their city (Delhi), and motivated enough to try to do something about it. The initial impetus was the destruction of the Delhi Ridge, though prior to that some of us had got together as individuals to protest against Rhesus macaque export to the US, the permission given to Saudi Arabian princes to hunt the bustard in Rajasthan, and the non-ratification of CITES by a European country (Belgium) as this enabled destructive wildlife trade to continue. Our vision was somewhat limited, mostly relating to wildlife and nature (blissful innocent days, they were, none of these complexities of communities and equity and politics and global markets and so on!). It was only subsequently, with exposure during treks through the Chipko area (1980 and 1981), investigations into the firing at Bharatpur (1982), impacts of pollution by Badarpur Power Station on a rural population, and the Narmada 'development' projects (1983), and so on, that we considerably expanded our scope to the overall issues of environment and development, the politics of nature governance and management, and so on. What follows is an attempt to distil this learning, which explicitly or implicitly became "KV philosophy"...and linked to this, the principles of our functioning.

2. Philosophy on environmental issues

From those early years, KV has evolved a broader understanding of the nature and roots of the environmental crisis we are in; and some kind of philosophy of how we view environmental issues.

Broadly, KV believes that the environmental crisis is a result of the following factors:

1. Increasing alienation from our natural surrounds, and a weakening of the belief that we are part of nature and that nature has its own intrinsic worth.
2. A model of 'development' that places unlimited material growth as the ultimate objective to be achieved at all costs.
3. A society that has deep social, political, and economic inequities, which enable a small powerful minority to determine the fate of nature and natural resources.
4. Absence of a sense of urgency in institutions of decision-making as also in the public at large, and of the popular political will to act.

Emanating from this broad understanding, Kalpavriksh's philosophy contains the following **key elements**:

1. The belief in nature and non-human species having their own right to existence, and of humans being part of nature;

¹ This is a constantly evolving document, reviewed periodically by Kalpavriksh through group discussions. The current note is as of late 2019.

2. The belief in equity/equality, non-discrimination and justice amongst human beings, in particular to do with issues of access to nature and natural resources, decision-making power, community-government relations, and so on;
3. The belief that human development processes and projects have to be ecologically sustainable (in that they do not irretrievably damage essential ecosystem functions, do not endanger species, do not undermine the natural resource-based livelihoods of others), and therefore that current development processes and economic systems (which treat nature and people as mere raw materials and commodities, foster unbridled accumulation of material wealth, and have no checks on the development of destructive or exploitative technologies), need drastic change;
4. The belief that people should be able to manage their own lives and the ecosystems around them to the extent possible, and that governmental/corporate domination over their lives is undesirable;
5. The belief that respecting natural and cultural diversity is a crucial principle to uphold.

3. Working principles

KV has been acutely conscious of the need to reflect the above elements of environmental philosophy in its functioning style, to the extent possible. This has meant a stress on the following:

1. **Voluntarism:** For the first decade-plus, KV was totally voluntary. Today, it is a mix of paid and completely voluntary members. However, what is important is that the spirit of voluntarism remains strong, in which even paid members are willing to do much more than would be required by a 9 to 5 job, and are willing to work despite lower than market rates. Members are eager to put in that “extra” effort, help others, and take on voluntary tasks like campaigns and collective activities.
2. **Non-hierarchical and respectful functioning:** We’ve never had a formal hierarchical structure, and consciously so. “Natural” hierarchies (related to greater experience or motivation, who has initiated a particular task/process, etc) do manifest themselves once in a while, and there has been a trend to increase ‘systems’ and ‘structures’ in KV’s functioning, several of them necessary due to legal regulations governing us; but we continue to be informal and attempt to be egalitarian in our day to day functioning. Importantly, we recognize the principles of mutuality (recognition of each person’s importance, etc), reciprocity (fairness of treatment from each to all and all to each), respect (for dignity, individuality, freedom, etc.) and acceptance (natural differences, capacities, etc.), though we do slip up every once in a while in living them.
3. **Democratic decision-making:** Linked to the non-hierarchical nature is the attempt to make decision-making accessible to all members, regardless of how new or old they are to the group. Such a mode of functioning was established right from the early days of decision-making regarding campaigns such as the Delhi Ridge. The downside of this is of course that it takes twice as long to take a decision, but it would seem to be worth it. Part of this is the attempt to have a clear flow of information or transparency among members, and striving to enable freedom of expression of one’s

thoughts and opinions without fear. In the first couple of decades there was a lot of face-to-face interaction enabling such decision-making; subsequently digital communication has also become prominent, especially given that members are no longer in one city.

4. **Modest and equitable pay:** The matter of how much members should be paid, has probably occupied a few hundred hours of discussion time in KV since we started paying people! Honoraria is such that people are not looking at KV only as a source for jobs, but more importantly as somewhere where the interest or passion for environment-related work can also be nourished; but of course also where basic sustenance can be provided). This issue is intrinsically linked to the voluntarism spirit mentioned above, stemming from and it and in turn encouraging its sustenance. Linked to it is the issue of internal equity in honoraria; we try not to have a significant difference in honoraria based on work done or number of years spent in Kalpavriksh.
5. **Non-ostentatious working environment and facilities:** As in the case of honoraria, KV has had hours and hours of discussions on our working facilities. Several times, we consciously decided not to have an office (in Delhi), though of course this was also partly possible because some of us used our other offices for the purpose! Our first few capital ‘acquisitions’ (computers, etc) came after more than 15 years of our existence. We continue to believe in this way of functioning, though of course the imperatives of working in the changing professional environment have meant more investment in office facilities. They have also entailed far greater travel than earlier, including outside India, which adds to our ecological footprint; how to tackle this contradiction is part of ongoing discussions.
6. **Collective activities:** For the better part of our existence, we have stressed on the importance of collective activities, which several members can take part in and feel ownership of. Nature-related activities such as birding were one major manifestation of this. This was also more possible in the context of most activities being voluntary. More ‘project-based’ work in the last couple of decades has challenged such a collective functioning, with significant individual or subgroup work becoming common. But there is regular sharing of the work we each do individually or in subgroups, and there is an attempt at self-critical or mutually critical reflection of each other’s work at least once a year as a collective activity.
7. **Small organisational scale:** To stay “small” has also been a conscious decision from the start (several other groups that started around the same time as ours, are now major institutions with dozens of employees and their own buildings). This is in keeping with many of the above aspects of our working philosophy, as it seems clear that an infinitely expanding group cannot sustain a non-hierarchical structure with a stress on voluntarism, or maintain its openness towards other groups, its humility, basic human values, and technical quality. However, staying ‘small’ does not necessarily mean that our scale of work is small...indeed several of our projects and activities are at a fairly large scale, which has been possible because of the voluntary spirit, attempts at increasing efficiency, and open-ness in networking with others.
8. **Grounded in grassroots reality, supporting grassroots groups:** KV has always tried to relate its work to the reality at the grassroots. This is how we started off; this is how we learnt most of what we know. Some of our activities are at the local level with communities in rural or urban areas, others are in the nature of being a support

group to communities and grassroots movements, and yet others are focused on policy/conceptual work and networking.

9. **Sustaining interest in an activity:** KV members have tried to take an issue that they engage in to its logical conclusion. Several campaigns and tasks have been followed through for years, or at least till some other group/community was able to continue with it. But this has not always been possible, partly due to the structure of the group including voluntarism and dependence of activities on single or a few members.
10. **Non-violent tactics:** KV has not taken part in, nor condones, violence in our activities (violence here refers to actions that could harm other beings).
11. **Integrity and honesty:** An atmosphere encouraging honesty, integrity, and accountability has been attempted in KV's work; and processes of discussion and redressal where there may be slip-ups in maintaining such values.
12. **Diversity in contributions that are valued:** Members contribute to KV's vision and mission in different ways: involvement in project or other substantive activities, back-end work that keeps the organization running, raising funds or other necessary resources, outreach and public relations, maintaining an atmosphere of open discussion and sharing, bringing in freshness of youth and youthful ideas, wisdom of age or experience, scholarly knowledge or activist fervor, visioning and ideation, artistic inputs and outputs, and much else ... even just being good listeners. In a way all of the above can be considered 'work', none to be considered 'higher' or more valued than the other, as they contribute to whatever KV stands for, does, and produces.

4. The group structure

As mentioned above, KV has consciously made a choice not to have a hierarchical structure. Natural hierarchies (related to greater experience, motivation etc) do manifest themselves, but by and large the group continues to be rather egalitarian in its functioning. Formally, the decision-making is normally by the entire General Body through email, group discussions, or at the Annual General Meetings. For day to day decisions, project coordinators are primarily responsible for their projects and deadlines.

Over the years, certain mechanisms have evolved to help members consistently meet the overall objectives of the group and the particular objectives of projects. One such mechanism is the decision that all members report to the group on the progress of their project and other activities every once in a while on email or face-to-face, and at least in internal newsletters and during the annual meetings. The group responds with constructive criticism and other support that may be required.

Besides this a core group is elected every year at the Annual General Body Meeting. This group has a largely nominal function in normal times (especially as the law requires us to have such a 'managing committee'), but it is empowered to take decisions for the group in case of an emergency.

5. Challenges

To meet its philosophical tenets, KV has identified the following weaknesses and challenges, and ways to tackle them:

1. **Greater focus on vernacular work**, extending the work done in local languages in some areas; this has been consciously attempted through translations of reports, publications, documentation, and commissioning stories (in written and audio-visual form) in some other Indian languages, and working in local language with communities as in Bhimashankar, Maharashtra.
2. **Greater ability to sustain key campaigns:** KV has been at the forefront of some of the most crucial issues that India has faced in the last 2-3 decades: large dams (and related to that the model of development), people-protected area conflicts, mining, community based conservation, biodiversity policy issues such as biopiracy, and so on. But on some of these, we have not been able to adequately sustain our work, partly because of lack of long-term resources, partly for other reasons. Periodically there has been an attempt to focus on a fewer number of priority areas, to which the whole group could devote its energy and time and skills, but with its somewhat 'anarchic' nature, this has been hard to sustain!
3. **More active links to key non-environmental sectors:** Recognising the need for more work in building sustained relationships with a range of non-environmental groups --- labour movements and unions, human rights groups, adivasi/dalit movements, water related movements, and others that are not *directly* environmental but have a bearing on environmental issues --- there have been attempts at creating (e.g. Vikalp Sangam) or participating in larger networks of movements (e.g. National Alliance of Peoples' Movements).
4. **Greater internal diversity:** KV has mostly had a significantly woman-dominated gender ratio, but on some other counts (religion, caste, class) it has not been adequately diverse. Recognition of this is explicit, but we continue to struggle to find ways of dealing with it without resorting to tokenism.
5. **Financial sustainability:** over the last couple of decades dependence on donors, especially foreign ones, has grown, and KV is struggling with figuring out more distributed and domestic funding sources and more avenues of self-reliance in funding. In general the critical civil sector is struggling in the current context of governmental attacks on dissent, and KV needs to be part of a more collective approach to sustenance.
6. **Scale and extent of impact:** having consciously decided to remain small, KV cannot have the kind of impact (extent, scale, outreach) as some larger groups can. One way out of this is to align with other groups and movements, which it has tried throughout its history. Yet this limitation curtails some activities, e.g. the active marketing of its books.

KV will face increasing challenges in maintaining its philosophical stands and working principles, as it confronts more and more complex and difficult challenges in the external environment. Much remains to be done to overcome its internal weaknesses. Crucial to its ability to face up to these challenges, is the continued willingness to discuss basic issues, thrash out problems, be self-critical, and be frank with each other in a constructive spirit.